

T H E

## L O U N G E R.

[ N<sup>o</sup> XXVIII. ]

Saturday, Aug. 13. 1785.

## Continuation of the Remarks upon TRAGEDY.

THE high heroic virtue we see exemplified in Tragedy warms the imagination and swells the mind; but being distant from the ordinary feelings and exertions of life, has, I suspect, but little influence upon the conduct. On the contrary, it may be fairly doubted, whether this play of the fancy, in the walks of virtue and benevolence, does not lessen the exertion of those qualities in practice and reality. "Indocilis privata loqui," said Lucan of Cæsar: So in some measure, he who is deeply conversant in the tragic phrase, in the swelling language of compassion, of generosity, and of love, finding no parallel in his common intercourse with mankind, will not so readily open his heart to the calls on his feeling, which the vulgar distresses of his fellow-creatures, or the ordinary relations of life, may occasion. In stage-misfortunes, in fancied sufferings, the drapery of the figure hides its form; and real distress, coming in a homely and unornamented state, disgusts the eye which had poured its tears over the hero of tragic misery, or the martyr of romantic woe. Real calamity offends with its coarseness, and therefore is not produced on the scene, which exhibits in its stead the fantastic griefs of a delicate and high-wrought sensibility. Lillo, in his *Fatal Discovery*, presented extreme poverty as the distress of the scene; and the moral of his piece was to inculcate, that poverty was not to be shunned, nor wealth pursued, at the expence of honesty and virtue. A modern audience did not relish a distress so real, but gave their tears to the widow of St Valori, who was mad for the loss of a husband killed twenty years before. From the same cause the *Gamester*, one of the best and most moral of our later tragedies, though successively represented by the greatest players, has never become popular. And even now the part of *Mrs Beverly*, (the first character of the first actresses in the world), is performed to indifferent houses.

The tragic poet is striving to distress his hero that he may move his audience: it is not his business to equalize the affliction to the evil that occasions it; the effect is what he is to exhibit, which he is to clothe in the flowing language of poetry, and the high colouring of imagination; and if the cause be not very disproportionate indeed, the reader, or the spectator, will not find fault with it. *Castalio*, in the *Orphan*,

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*phan*, (a play so grossly immoral, that it were unfair in me to quote it, except as illustrative of this single argument), is mad with anguish and with rage, because his wife's maid refuses him access to her apartment, according to the previous appointment they had made; and *Orosmane* in *Zayre* remains "immobile, et sa langue glacée," because his bride begs him to defer their marriage for a day. Yet these were disappointments which the lover of *Otway*, and much more the hero of *Voltaire*, might surely have borne with greater fortitude.

If we are to apply all this in example, it seems to have a tendency to weaken our mind to our own sufferings, without opening it to the sufferings of others. The real evils which the dignity of the scene hides from our view, are those which we ought to pity in our neighbours; the fantastic and imaginary distresses which it exhibits, are those we are apt to indulge in ourselves. Here then Tragedy adds to the list of our calamities, without increasing the catalogue of our virtues.

As Tragedy thus dignifies the distresses, so it elevates the actions of its personages, their virtues and their vices. But this removes virtue at a greater distance from us, and brings vice nearer; it exalts the first to a point beyond our imitation, and ennobles the latter to a degree above our abhorrence. Shakespeare, who generally discriminates strongly the good and ill qualities of his characters, has yet exhibited a *Macbeth*, a tyrant and a murderer, whom we are disposed rather to pity than to hate. "Modern Tragedy," says a celebrated critic, "has become more a school of virtue than the ancient, by being more the theatre of passion: an *Othello*, hurried by jealousy to murder his innocent wife; a *Jaffier*, ensnared by resentment and want, to engage in a conspiracy, and then stung with remorse and involved in ruin; a *Siffredi*, through the deceit which he employs for public spirited ends, bringing destruction on all whom he loved: these are the examples which Tragedy now displays, by means of which it inculcates on men the proper government of their passions." I am afraid, if we appeal to the feelings of the audience at the conclusion of any of those pieces, we shall not find the effect to be what is here supposed. *Othello* we rather pity for his jealousy, than hate as a murderer.

With *Jaffier* and his associates we are undoubtedly leagued against the rulers of Venice; and even the faith and tenderness of *Belvidera* hardly make us forgive her for betraying their secret. The sentiments of *Siffredi*, however wise and just, are disregarded where they impeach the dignity and supereminence of love. His deceit indeed is blamed, which is said to be the moral of the piece; but it is blamed because it hindered the union of *Tancred* and *Sigismunda*, which, from the very beginning of the play, is the object in which the reader or spectator is interested. Reverse the situation, make it a contrivance to defeat the claim of the tyrant's daughter, to give the throne to *Tancred*, and to place *Sigismunda* there at his side, the audience would admire its ingenuity, and rejoice in its success.

In the mixture of a plot, and amidst the variety of situations, where weaknesses are flattered and passions indulged, at the same time that

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virtues are displayed and duties performed, one set of readers will enjoy the pleasure of the first, while those only who have less need to be instructed will seize the instruction of the latter. When *Marcus* dies for his country, the ladies in the side-boxes only consider his death as removing the bar to the marriage of *Lucia* with his brother *Portius*.

In Tragedy as in Novel, which is sometimes a kind of tragedy, the author is obliged, in justification of weak characters, to elevate villainous ones, or to throw round their vices a bewitching address, and captivating manners. *Lovelace* is made a character which the greater number of girls admire; — in order to justify the seduction of *Clarissa*. *Lothario*, though very inferior, is something of the same cast, to mitigate the crime of *Calista*. The story would not be probable else; — granted : but in proportion to the art of the poet, in rendering it probable, he heightens the immoral effect, of which I complain.

As the incidents must be formed, so must the sentiments be introduced according to the character and condition of the person speaking them, not according to the laws of virtue, or the dictates of prudence. To give them this propriety, they must often be apologies for vice and for fraud, or contain ridicule against virtue and honesty. It is not sufficient to answer, that if the person uttering them is punished in the course, or at the end of the play, the expiation is sufficiently made; if the sentiments at the time are shrewdly imagined, and forcibly expressed, they will have a powerful effect on the mind, and leave impressions which the retribution of *poetical justice* will hardly be able to efface.

On poetical justice, indeed, I do not lay so much stress as some authors have done. I incline to be of the opinion of one of my predecessors, that we are frequently more roused to a love of virtue, and a hatred of vice, when virtue is unfortunate, and vice successful, than when each receives the recompence it merits. But I impute more to striking incidents, to the sentiments running through the tenor of a piece, than to the general impression of its *denouement*. *Monf. d'Alembert* says, that in any sort of spectacle which would leave the poet more at liberty than tragedies taken from history, in the *Opera*, for example, the author would not easily be pardoned, for allowing vice to go unpunished. "I remember to have seen," continues he, "a MS. opera of *Atreus*, where that monster perished by a thunderbolt, exclaiming, with a savage satisfaction,

"Tonnez, Dieux impuissans ;

"Frappez ; je suis vengé !"

"This would have made one of the happiest *denouements* that can well be imagined." As to theatrical effect, I am quite of his opinion ; but as to the moral, I cannot agree with him. The line which he quotes, brilliant, forcible, and bold, would have remained with the audience, not to recal the punishment of guilt, but to mark the pleasure of revenge.

But it is not only from the vices or imperfections of tragic characters that we are to fear the danger of familiarising the approach of evil, or encouraging the growth of error. Their very virtues, I fear,

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are often dangerous to form the principles, or draw the imitation of their readers. Theirs are not so much the useful, the productive virtues (if I may be allowed the expression) of real life, as the shining and showy qualities which attract the applause, or flatter the vanity of the unthinking. The extreme, the enthusiasm even of a laudable propensity, takes from its usefulness to others, and degenerates into a blind and headlong indulgence in the possessor. In the greatest part of modern Tragedies, such are the qualities of the persons that are most in favour with the Public. In what relates to passive excellence, prudence to avoid evils, or fortitude to bear them, are not the virtues of Tragedy, conversant as it is with misfortune; it is proud to indulge in sorrow, to pour its tears without the controul of reason, to die of disappointments which wisdom would have overcome. There is an æra in the life of most young people, and those too the most amiable, where all this is their creed of excellence, generosity, and heroism, and that creed is drawn from Romance and Tragedy.

In the remarks which in this and two former papers I have made on *Novel* and on *Tragedy*, two of the most popular of all kinds of writing, I have ventured, in the hardihood of a Moralist, rather beyond the usual caution of a periodical paper, that wishes to conciliate the favour of the Public. By those whose daily and favourite reading is crossed by my observations, I shall be asked, if I mean to proscribe every Novel and every Tragedy, or of what kind of each I am disposed to allow the perusal, and to what class of readers their perusal may be trusted. To such I would answer in general, that if I had influence enough to abridge the list of both species of reading, I believe neither morals nor taste would suffer by the restriction. I have pointed out the chief dangers to which I conceive the perusal of many such works is liable. There are certain minds, no doubt, to which they may be useful, if they are not of that grossly immoral kind against which I think it unnecessary to warn my readers. The cold and selfish may be warmed and expanded by the fiction of distress, or the eloquence of sentiment; the coarse and the rude may receive polish and refinement from the delineation of elegant manners, and of delicate feelings: But there is a sort of mind more common in youth than either of those, tender, warm, and visionary, to which the walks of fancy and enthusiasm, of romantic love, of exaggerated sorrow, of trembling sensibility, are very unsafe. To readers of this complexion, the amusement which the works above mentioned afford, should be sparingly allowed, and judiciously chosen. In such bosoms, feeling or susceptibility must be often repressed or directed; to encourage it by premature or unnatural means, is certainly hurtful. They resemble some luxuriant soils which may be enriched beyond a wholesome fertility, till weeds are then only produced; weeds, the more to be regretted, as, in the language of a Novellist himself, "they grow in the soil from which virtue should have sprung."

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